

Superheroes teach our kids the wrong message

Real heroes are not predestined, they seize opportunity

Ask anyone under the age of 10, and they'll tell you their hero is Superman "because he can fly!" or Batman "because he drives a Batmobile!"

They say you can judge a generation by its heroes. We wonder how many children are sitting around waiting for their superpowers to manifest before they take action.

In the comic book world, heroes are bitten by radioactive spiders (Spider-Man), become test subjects for military experiments (Captain America) or the victims of gamma ray research gone awry (the Hulk). Otherwise they're aliens or mutants (Superman, the X-Men). And if they lack superpowers, they're playboy billionaire narcissists, heirs to bottomless fortunes that buy indestructible suits and gadgets (Iron Man, Batman).



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In the battle for the hearts and minds of our children, superheroes teach that heroics are inflicted by science, mutant genes, or the last will and testament of wealthy parents. Hardly things worth aspiring to. Few of us will inherit billions, let alone develop mutant genes. Most of all, they teach us that heroism happens to you — the inciting incident is involuntary.

Child psychologists are largely divided as to the effects of superheroes on early development, with the "pro" camp citing findings that even donning a cape can build self-confidence in kids. Comic book heroes, they say, help convey lessons about good and evil.

But the very mindset that



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Waneek Horn-Miller led Canada's water polo team at the 2000 Olympic Games. Today she speaks to non-aboriginal Canadians to foster better understanding of her culture.

equates heroism with spontaneous superpowers is troubling. To a kid, this could mean that regular humans can't be heroes.

In an insightful TEDx Toronto talk, writer and community activist Dave Meslin debunks the myth of becoming a hero by prophecy — one who is chosen (again, by an outward force), or marked, like the lightning bolt on Harry Potter's forehead. If involuntary heroism is what

we're teaching our kids, he says, they'll grow up missing the point. Real leadership "comes from within; it's about following your own dreams uninvited — uninvited." Leadership is not waiting for a magic wand.

Real heroes are idealistic and impatient for change. They don't take up their tasks begrudgingly and then take off a mask once the bad guy's been defeated. Heroism is a continuous struggle that

often yields a series of small victories, usually from the combined efforts of a team.

Take some of our personal role models, like Ontario's lieutenant-governor, David Onley. Struck with polio as a child, Onley still walks with the aid of crutches or uses a scooter. This real-life Professor Xavier crusades for opportunities for people with disabilities. He has expanded the dialogue around accessibility beyond ramps and prime parking spaces to "that which allows people to achieve their full potential."

His wife, Ruth Ann Onley, is a testament to the quiet hero behind the scenes. She has personally visited 25 fly-in First Nations communities in Ontario on behalf of her husband, making a symbolic statement that the lieutenant-governor's role and presence shouldn't be limited to the most accessible parts of Ontario.

Real heroism is building bridges with your one-time enemies. Waneek Horn-Miller was stabbed by a soldier when she was just 14, during the infamous standoff between Mohawks and the

town of Oka, Quebec, in 1990. She suffered post-traumatic stress disorder, but has said she "self-medicated with sport." Horn-Miller led Canada's water polo team at the 2000 Olympic Games. Today she speaks to non-aboriginal Canadians to foster better understanding of her culture.

Double-lung transplant recipient and Ottawa native Helene Campbell launched a fundraising campaign to help other Canadians waiting for transplants. Campbell can't fly, but she's breathing with two donated lungs, and is now the country's most renowned organ donation advocate. That's even more incredible.

In the real world, heroes don't wait around for radioactive spiders. They muster up old-fashioned human courage and make a conscious decision to change the world.

Brothers Craig and Marc Kielburger founded the educational partner and international charity Free The Children and the youth empowerment movement We Day.